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laritas Scripturae: The Role of Perspicuity in Protestant Hermeneutics

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The affirmation *claritas Scripturae* has taken various and distinct shapes in the history of Protestant hermeneutics, each corresponding to the religious and intellectual climates encountered. Scripture's clarity can be described as a protean principle in Protestant hermeneutics. It is never finally severed from the larger issues of Scriptural authority, efficacy and suffi-ciency. It is meaningless alone but is implied by a multitude of issues rooted in a Protestant concept of Scripture.[1]

This paper proposes to evaluate the manner in which assertions of Scripture's perspicuity have been presented in Protestant hermeneutics, with the actual appeals to a Protestant idea of Scripture's clarity illustrating the complex relationship of Scriptural and hermeneutical authority. Of principal interest are the various characterizations of perspicuity by Protestants, the means employed in its defense, and the value of affirming *claritas Scripturae*. This is an exercise designed to test Protestant appeals to perspicuity historically rather than a retrieval or archival effort to prove an assertion of the Protestant concept of perspicuity.[2] The method employed is to be distinguished from efforts to offer exegetical or epistemic warrants in favor of Scripture's clarity. Rather, this is an attempt to justify perspicuity historically precisely because perspicuity is grounded in a unified vision of historical and hermeneutical warrant.

I. What Is Clear About Clarity?

Protestant ideas of Scripture's clarity were never as simple in their argumentation as Scripture itself was thought to be plain. As illustrated in Luther's work, the appeal to perspicuity can be described in terms of its polemical context. It also introduces the inherent limitations of perspicuity within Protestant hermeneutics.

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Luther's encounter with Erasmus in 1524-1525 first brought the subject of perspicuity into prominence.[3] Luther objected that Erasmus projected the reader's inability to understand Scripture on Scripture itself rather than admitting that the darkness of sin obscures the reader's understanding.[4] Erasmus attributed to Scripture a lack of clarity when Scripture "simply confesses" certain assertions but does not explain how such doctrines can be (such as the Trinity, the divine and human natures of Christ, or the unforgivable sin).[5]

While Luther chastised Erasmus for impiety, equivocation and parroting the skepticism of the sophists, the greater threat from Erasmus was his assertion that Scripture's obscurity bolstered the authority of the papacy.[6] Luther believed that in the papal kingdom "nothing is more commonly stated or more generally accepted than the idea that the Scriptures are obscure and ambiguous, so that the spirit to interpret them must be sought from the Apostolic See of Rome."[7] He suggested that the entire design of Erasmus' diatribe was bent on demonstrating that the Scriptures were not "crystal clear" in order to frighten people away from reading Scripture and into reliance upon Rome.[8]

The enthusiasm of Luther's pen assumed a decidedly polemical tone when he refused to allow even the slightest hint that the message of Scripture might be obscure in any fashion. It was the matters essential to faith that were clear, if not in one place then in another.[9] Luther referred to the subject matter of Scripture in the plural and included the incarnation of Christ, his substitutionary suffering, his resurrection and his heavenly reign. He also said the Christological and trinitarian doctrines were clear.[10]

Luther also cautioned that we should not be surprised at the difficulties encountered by even the most learned. It is the rule that all are blind,

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and the surprise is that any understand and clearly see the message of Scripture: "No man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God."[11] Luther's optimism toward the clarity of Scripture was only matched by his pessimism toward the obscurity of those without the Spirit.[12] It was at this point of tension that Luther suggested a distinction between the outer clarity of Scripture (whereby Scripture is presented with pastoral intentions) and the inner clarity of Scripture (by means of the Spirit's illumination).[13] Outer clarity eliminates the need for another factor to understand Scripture's literal sense (such as tradition or the Church) and as such establishes a hermeneutical convention. Inner clarity

corresponds to personal certitude and persuasion brought about by the quickening and enlightening of the Spirit.

This was all obvious to Luther. His rhetoric would allow nothing less than absolute certainty about Scripture's absolute clarity. He feigned weariness due to the tedium of having to explain at such great length something so obvious: "But I fancy I have long since grown wearisome, even to dullards, by spending so much time and trouble on a matter that is so very clear."[14] What is clear about clarity? To Luther, everything.

II. A Protestant Doctrine Of Perspicuity

What was particularly Protestant about Luther's concept of Scripture's clarity? The context provides the ready answer: Rome advocated Scripture's obscurity and the necessity of Church hierarchy as interpreter. Trent charged that it was the role of "holy mother Church ... to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures."[15] But this was only another way of asserting the authority of the Church over Scripture.[16] By contrast, Protestants opted for fusion of hermeneutic authority and Scriptural authority. For example, viewing perspicuity as a quality of or inherent in the nature of Scripture itself might lessen the interpretative tangles addressed by Rome's claims against Protestantism (or so thought Protestant scholastic

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theologians). While perspicuity was the Protestant counterclaim to the charge of Scripture's obscurity - an assertion with a connotation of objectivity - the subjectivity and limits of Scripture's clarity were projected upon the interpreter to explain various interpretative discrepancies.

From the start Protestants conceded that perspicuity was never intended to supplant the necessity of interpretation, but it nonetheless emerged as a hermeneutic principle with far-reaching consequences - what we might refer to as perspicuity as hermeneutic. The need to project upon Scripture characteristics that sustain Protestant claims regarding the nature of hermeneutics was at the heart of their claims to Scripture's clarity.[17] In turn, the hermeneutical debate over perspicuity was not severed from the debate over the nature of Scripture itself.

To illustrate, Protestant scholastic theologians consistently maintained that perspicuity was an attribute, a property, of Scripture.[18] The significant themes attached to the advocacy of perspicuity include the belief that (1) Scripture is a clear and certain rule of faith since no necessary doctrine is obscure, (2) clarity is a necessity since Scripture alone is the means of saving faith, (3) Scripture functions as its own interpreter with the unclear being explained by the clear, (4) perspicuity is

only limited by human sin and ignorance, and (5) Scripture must be clear because God, its author, can only speak clearly and understandably.[19] Each assertion is predicated upon a consensual perception of Scripture's authority within Protestant hermeneutics: Scripture is clear because it is read as (if it is) clear.[20] While there is no isolation of clarity from a Protestant assertion of Scripture's author-

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ity, each of the five themes revolves around the belief that clarity is a quality of Scripture itself rather than something brought to the text by the reader.[21]

The investment in perspicuity's significance was high: It corresponds to God's character (to claim Scripture's message is obscure is to insult God[22]), and the accessibility and certain knowledge of salvation rest upon the appreciable nature of faith (divine promises are moot unless intelligible).[23] Richard Muller accurately suggested that these themes "are intelligible only in the context of the debate over authority and interpretation."[24] Perspicuity was a necessary article to sustain distinctively Protestant hermeneutics, a contention necessary to preserve the insistence upon the privilege of interpretation without exercising deference to ecclesiastical authority as hermeneutic.[25] Rome did, after all, have its own view of Scripture's clarity rendered through the Church and its tradition. This meant that the real concern of a Protestant concept of perspicuity had to do with the belief that Scripture was clear in itself and clearly interpreted itself without the necessity of peremptory appeal to ecclesiastical authority.[26] Post-Reformation theologians insisted that perspicuity, as a quality of Scripture, was implied by the nature of Scripture's authority.

This raises an important question: Who may understand the Scriptures that are clear in themselves? Luther's distinction between inner and outer clarity actually served to confirm as well as mitigate accessibility to Scripture. Its salvific message is accessible and efficacious only to those enlightened by the Spirit, although it is assumed to be clear to any reader exercising ordinary means to understand Scripture's literal sense.

III. The Piety of Perspicuity

A consistent check on Protestant estimates of perspicuity has been the dual emphasis that Scripture is not simply clear and, similarly, not simply obscure. Instead, Scripture is both clear and obscure, not merely clear or obscure - a tension associated with human ways of knowing and with

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ignorance and sin from which there is no complete extrication.[27] It is noteworthy that Protestants were fond of echoing Gregory's adage: Scripture is "a river in which the lamb may ford and the elephant must swim."[28]

Admitting the tension of Scripture's obscurity and clarity rendered Pro-testant hermeneutics more realistic and less polemical in nature. This admission also mitigates the role of perspicuity in Protestant hermeneutics in three ways: (1) It introduces a pastoral focus in which clarity is linked with obedience, (2) it accounts for the weakness of the reader beset by sin and finitude, and (3) it emphasizes the evangelical certainty of the message. These are subtleties that are necessary to realize the intent of perspicuity as hermeneutic, and they were united in Pietism's appeal to Scripture's clarity.

Philipp Jakob Spener was certain that "the Scriptures in themselves are not obscure" and therefore directed his interest to encourage "the means of proper Bible reading."[29] One must always approach the task of reading Scripture with prayer, asking for the enlightenment of the Spirit, in reverence toward the text, and leading to the response of obedience. These matters are then combined with the practical matters of reading.[30] "Simple pious readers" is the expression Spener used to describe Scripture's recipients. It is only appropriate that Scripture is simple because it is directed at the simple.[31] But he insisted that Scripture is both simple and demanding and is thus a challenge to both the learned and uneducated alike.[32] Interpreting Scripture is not simply a matter of education or learning, according to Johann Albrecht Bengel, because "Scripture teaches its own use, which consists in action. To act it, we must understand it, and this understanding is open to all the upright of heart."[33]

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The Pietists' concern for the pastoral implications of Scripture's clarity drew the accusations of ambiguity and subjectivism, primarily because they suggested that spiritual affection was the necessary prerequisite to understanding Scripture.[34] They argued that Scripture remains clear in itself but that the reader must exercise herself, spiritually, to understand (and obey).[35] Historians of Pietism are correct that Spener, August Hermann Francke and their followers emphasized the teleology of Scripture. But it is necessary to add that "these practical interests were but an application of the demands inherent in the Scriptures."[36] Pietists opposed the idea that Scripture was obscure with a traditionally Protestant response that such an idea would be inconsistent with the very intent of Scripture, and they wrestled with the pastoral need to stimulate readers to overcome the obscurity of the reader with spiritual ardor.[37]

IV. Evangelical Clarity

A theme closely related to Pietism's emphasis upon the goal of Scripture's clarity was enunciated by Chrysostom, repeated by Luther and echoed by Protestant confessions: "All things are clear and open that are in the divine Scriptures; the necessary things are all plain."[38] Not content with Chrysostom's optimism, one can ask: "Which is it? Are all things clear or only those things necessary?"[39] This is a modern question, forced by a distortion

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that isolates perspicuity from Scripture's teleology and authority. But it raises an important contention: "It is necessary to limit clarity."[40]

Westminster Protestants, for instance, admitted the reality of both Scripture's obscurity and clarity, primarily in the distinction between matters necessary for salvation and other matters. In both the *Irish Articles of Religion* (1615)[41] and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647)[42] the defense of Scripture's clarity was solely concerned with the accessibility of the evangelical message. Others had argued similarly concerning the difficult things in Scripture: "If we never understand we shall be never the worse for the attaining of everlasting salvation."[43]

The admission that "all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves" should not come as a shock to Protestants. Beginning with Luther they have argued that it is the subject matter of Scripture - its *res* (the law and the gospel) - that is clear.[44] We may say, with some degree of confidence to this point, that a notion of plenary perspicuity - that the entirety of the Bible is clear in itself - was foreign to Protestant hermeneutics.[45] Evangelical clarity is a positive affirmation and consistent with the intent of perspicuity for Protestant theologians. It accounts for the manner in which

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Scripture presents what is necessary for salvation but not the how or why of a given doctrine or to deny the necessity of interpretation.[46]

The practical need to encourage the use of necessary means to understand Scripture does not demonstrate that Protestants believed Scripture's clarity to be merely a matter of education or learning, though such things were presupposed.[47] The *Westminster Confession* affirmed that evangelical clarity is available "in a due use of ordinary means" that included the means of human learning and language and the means of preaching as well as the illumination of the Spirit.[48] The subject of Scripture's clarity was not equated with a translation or with historical proximity. Knowledge alone can never overcome one's blindness to Scripture's clear message. Nor does the affirmation of perspicuity mean that Scripture is simple as if it lacks obscurity in certain respects.[49]

There is a healthy tendency within Protestant hermeneutics that assumes if obscurity exists it exists for the reader.[50] But the *Westminster Confession* affirms that not only are "all things in Scripture not alike plain in themselves" but neither are all things

"clear unto all." Both Scripture and the reader are, in some sense, obscure or obscured. One should not stray too far into an either/or choice between whether Scripture is clear or the reader is obscured in her understanding. Such a dichotomy does not account for the complex relationship between reader and text.[51]What the affirmation of

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perspicuity upholds is the priority of evangelical clarity. The aspiration of Protestant hermeneutics is to bring together Scripture with its clearly presented message of salvation and an enlightened reader.

V. Scripture's Literal Sense And The Confession Of Its Perspicuity

There is a sincere distrust of perspicuity, and a praise of obscurity, afoot in modern hermeneutics. Either perspicuity is regarded as the epitome of precritical naivete and sacrificed on the altar of modernity, or it is regarded as a gnostic theme and a code available only to the privileged. For example, we have Frank Kermode's reminder that the Bible describes an "unfollowable world," one that is often able to be interpreted "only by our hermeneutical tricks."[52] Perspicuity is quickly and easily dismissed as nothing more than an illusion, a fideistic commitment to a religious fallacy that ancient texts are coherently understood with a realism uncommon even in our own day.

The Protestant assertion of Scripture's clarity both assumes and transcends literary and grammatical analysis of the text.[53] Luther equated the literal sense of Scripture with its perspicuity. He did not reject the prospect that there was a further, inner and spiritual meaning to the text but distrusted any displacement of Christ as the subject of a *sensus plenior.*[54] But the message of Scripture is presented in its literal or historical sense, and it is accessible according to the confession of its clarity. These hermeneutical assertions buttressed the Reformer's rejection of ecclesiastical tradition and authority and codified the fundamental theological relationship of Scripture's character as revelation from God, its grammatical form, and its accessibility and clarity within Protestant hermeneutics.[55]

The inner message (*res*) of Scripture was consistent with its grammatical form (*forma*), but the two were not mutually exhaustive one of another. As Wolfhart Pannenberg reminds us, the development of the tension be-

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tween these topics has maintained that "the outer clarity of Scripture must have some connection with the inner - a tendency toward the inner, toward the illumination of the heart."[56] Luther rejected the pneumatic appeals of the Zwickau prophets and

Karlstadt because they spiritualized away the literal meaning and required an additional condition or means of heavenly illumination to understand Scripture. Similarly, in the Rahtmannian controversy Lutheran theologians confronted and rejected the disassociation of the inner and outer meanings of Scripture, an error that was thought to infect early Pietism.[57] The unity of outer and inner clarity, the relationship of the objectivity and subjectivity of clarity, and the tension of the clarity and obscurity of Scripture and the hermeneutical task were never finally severed but were held in affinity within Protestant hermeneutics.[58] There exists a realistic tension between such neat distinctions, but it is a tension that is addressed (not explained) by the confessional role of perspicuity in Protestant hermeneutics. Perspicuity remained an invitation to believe, the existential correlation between God's promises and faith.

Reformed theologians similarly emphasized the inseparable relationship between the grammatical meaning of Scripture (its literal sense) and its theological clarity.[59] But how closely post-Reformation theologians followed the Reformers is disputed. A common complaint is that there was a shift away from the perspicuity of the message of Scripture and toward the clarity of the words.[60] The heart of the contention concerns the relationship between perspicuity as a confession of religious accessibility and the words in their semantic function. The supposed error arises when the words of Scripture are separated from the matter of Scripture (the message conveyed by the words).[61]

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If perspicuity is confined to the words of Scripture, the confession turns away from its evangelical significance and toward a semantic principle.[62] But in this sense perspicuity is not construed as a "Protestant" concept, there is nothing particularly religious about perspicuity, and it certainly is not fodder for creedal affirmation. The surrender of theological hermeneutics to a general theory of hermeneutics means that perspicuity as a matter of confession is sacrificed.[63]

The tension between form and function, and between clarity and obscurity, was intensified as much by Protestantism's engagement with modernity as it was with the Reformers' struggle over various approaches to the Biblical text (such as fourfold, threefold, twofold or single meaning in Scripture). Placing the Bible within the larger field of literature, and admitting that the Bible should be interpreted as any other book, brought about the regression of perspicuity to a component of a general theory of language, criticism and history. As the Enlightenment took root among Protestants, perspicuity was either banished to the prison reserved for arbitrary religious authorities or prostituted as another form of rational, empirical accessibility.[64] It might be that the loss of a confession of perspicuity or its transformation illustrates significant features of Protestant hermeneutics' confrontation with the rise of critical studies.

Perspicuity in the era of critical studies was characterized by a drastic turn away from its religious and confessional character to its implicit role in the isolation of the

Bible's words, grammar and history. Critical knowledge would remove the "obscurities [and] apparent contradictions."[65] In the names of empiricism and historicity, critical studies in the late eighteenth

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and nineteenth centuries counseled us to reread the Bible - not religiously, but as one would read any other book. This encouragement was based on the confidence that reason was a sufficient authority in religious inquiry and that the Bible was fully accessible, even to unbelieving study.[66]

Historical criticism was once thought to be Protestant itself, precisely because of the emphasis on the sufficiency and accessibility of Scripture and the equation of the literal and historical sense stemming from the Reformers.[67] To paraphrase Hans Frei: At one time the literal sense implied the historical sense, but now the historical sense implies the literal sense. The decisive turn to the empirical and historical in critical study of the Bible also transformed the nature of perspicuity in Protestant hermeneutics.

If perspicuity was recast into an empirical assumption, and if the investigation and understanding of Scripture became (in the Enlightenment sense) another science, then Protestants sacrificed their own hermeneutical tradition.[68] The literal sense is the "closest one can come to a consensus reading of the Bible as the sacred text in the Christian church."[69] But the literal sense, isolated from its character as a confession of the accessibility of Scripture's message, does not require a confession of faith but only a recognition of the circumstance of language.[70] Perspicuity is implied by Scripture's authority. But, one may ask, does this limit the potential development of perspicuity within Protestant hermeneutics?[71]

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VI. The Potential Of Perspicuity

Within the changing vistas of Protestant hermeneutics the consequences of adapting perspicuity introduced the extremes of unbounded confidence and reticent boundaries.[72] This is adequately demonstrated in the various applications of the idea in nineteenth-century culture both in Britain and North America. The religious heritage of Protestant vernacular translations suggests confidence in a vital relationship between true religion and access to an understandable Bible.[73] This enterprise capitalized upon removing the barriers that stood between the Bible and Protestant religion, and it depended upon a pietistic notion of accessibility and clarity, especially in Britain.

John Henry Newman suggested that Bible reading was the religion of the English people. In turn, perspicuity was a precious and widespread assumption of nineteenth-century British evangelicalism.[74] The significant efforts of Bible

societies in late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Britain demonstrate as much in their persistent efforts to distribute Bibles as a means of checking the tide of Catholicism and expanding the influence of Protestantism in British lands.[75] The distribution of Protestant translations of the Bible disseminated Protestantism. It was a form of evangelism precisely because it assumed access to Protestant doctrines.[76] That is, there is a distinct but related understanding of clarity in the history of Protestant

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translations: A clear vernacular translation promotes fidelity to the gospel that is clear.[77]

If British Protestants occasionally viewed perspicuity in generous terms and thereby capitalized on the religious sentiments of its culture, then in North America the sentiments of culture remade the religious spirit of ideas such as perspicuity.[78] George Marsden, among others, reminds us that the perspicuity of Scripture was subsumed under the "broader philosophical assumption of the perspicuity of truth generally."[79] A populist sentiment took root in the intellectual and religious climate of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to produce a distinctly American biblicism.[80]

In nineteenth-century America perspicuity became a democratized affirmation of religious equality. Lost was the responsibility of a spiritual priesthood, and gained was the right of private judgment. It appears that Protestants viewed Scripture's clarity as a pedestrian opinion. Charles Hodge argued that the perspicuity of Scripture meant that the "Bible is a plain book," that it "is intelligible by the people," and that Scripture was addressed to "the people." Therefore "to them are directed these profound discussions of Christian doctrine, and these comprehensive expositions of Christian duty. They are everywhere assumed to be competent to understand what is written."[81] He went on to add: "It need hardly be remarked that this right of private judgement is the great safeguard of civil and religious liberty."[82]

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In an effort to arrest the influence of the right of private judgment coupled with and justified by an appeal to Scripture's clarity, John Nevin advocated "a limitation in some form to the principle, *No creed but the Bible.*" Sounding much like Catholic critics during the Reformation, Nevin lamented the disarray autonomous appeals to perspicuity brought upon Protestantism. But for Nevin this was the prophetic warning not of Tridentine Catholicism but of historical contemplation: "If the Bible be at once so clear and full as a formulary of Christian doctrine and practice, how does it come to pass that where men are left most free to use it in this way ... they are flung asunder so perpetually in their religious faith, instead of being brought together?"[83] The feigned ecumenism of a variety of sects was merely a way of affirming their particular form of sectarianism, each justified by an appeal to the clarity of the Bible.

Nevin's corrective was to discard the autonomy of private judgment and restore a genuinely Protestant hermeneutic in which perspicuity was governed by the living tradition of the Church embodied in its historic creeds. The controlling force of Protestant tradition itself, as many have argued, always existed alongside the confession of Scripture's accessibility and clarity. Hodge advocated a similar boundary: "To dissent from the faith of the universal Church (i.e., the body of true believers), is tantamount to dissenting from the Scriptures themselves."[84] The need to restrain perspicuity arose from the desire to mitigate the atomistic tendencies of separating Scripture's clarity from an eclectic appeal to a Protestant canonical rule and thereby salvage perspicuity within the larger framework of the Protestant hermeneutical tradition.[85]

Appealing to an eclectic Protestant tradition may display some control over the potential abuse of perspicuity, but it does not resolve the realistic friction among the various exponents of Scripture's clarity. For example, an issue of perennial concern is the relationship of clarity and obscurity in the application of the principle that the clear interpret the unclear.[86] Within

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Protestant hermeneutics the principle that Scripture is *sui ipsius interpres* is as much polemical as it is interpretative. It bespeaks a dogmatic creedal formula and does not solve the tension between the interpretative tradition of a text and the actual history of that text.[87] Perspicuity serves the ends of Protestant theological hermeneutics rather than its own purpose as a simple hermeneutical concern.

The question remains, then: By what standard does a passage come to be regarded as clear to interpret, and which passages are obscure to be interpreted? As James Dunn noted, the determination of which texts are attributed the status of "clear" and which are labeled "obscure" often indicates more about the prejudices of the interpreter than the actual clarity or obscurity of a given text.[88] Ultimately, even accounting for the role of perspicuity the Protestant interpreter is Scripture's interpreter. [89]

The Reformers' suspicion regarding the role of human sin and the question of Scripture's obscurity is easily transformed into a healthy dose of suspicion regarding circuitous and intractable appeals to Scripture's clarity as a justification for a particular doctrine or in isolation from the broader Protestant theological tradition.[90] A suspicion of tyranny persists when perspicuity is viewed as more than an implication of Scripture's authority in Protestant hermeneutics.

VII. Rescuing Clarity

The significance of perspicuity within early Protestant hermeneutics was coupled with the focal issue of rejecting totalitarianism, or, as R. H. Popkin put the matter, the question of differing authorities.[91] Today's hermeneutical challenges have turned the revolution against the Protestant hermeneutical tradition: The first Protestants cried out that totalitarianism must be rejected. But from the opposite extreme the advocates of deconstructionism raise the same complaint: Totalitarianism must be rejected. Caught in the middle is the text of Scripture, which is viewed as "either totally perspicuous

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or totally indeterminate."[92] The two positions embody dissimilar responses to the problem of authority and Scripture.[93]

The jeopardy of modernity was the promise to rescue the Bible from religion[94] or - the more pedestrian mission in North American liberalism - to restore "the old book in a new world."[95] The effort to conserve both the Bible and the authority of modernity - scientific knowledge as opposed to precritical religious faith - led to the dual admission that the Bible is both clear and obscure.[96] Through modern critical study we understand more clearly the original meaning of Biblical texts, but because they are so foreign from ways of the modern world the effect is that the Bible itself is more actually obscure. Modernity transforms clarity into obscurity.[97] This transformation of clarity helps us understand how Protestants "lost the Bible."[98]

To this situation fundamentalists responded that a new form of totalitarianism had emerged in the garb of modernity. Interposed between the clear text and the reader is now the arbitrary authority of academic elitism. Revived are the totalitarian claims of Catholicism and tradition, this time in the priestly role of the educated mediator: "Like Romanism, [criticism] practically removes the Word of God from the common people by assuming that only scholars can interpret it; and, while Rome puts a *priest* between a man and the Word, criticism puts an *educated expositor* between the believer and his Bible."[99] The Bible did not drop into the hands of the priests but into those of the scholars, into the culture of science. Critical studies took the Bible out of the hands of laypersons and counseled them in their ignorance and inability to understand the Bible.[100] In contrast, capitalizing

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upon the well-established evangelical tradition of Bible reading, fundamentalists turned the affirmation of Scripture's clarity into the charter of antimodernist affection for the Bible.

All this means, at least, that the history of Protestant hermeneutics needs to be rescued from the either/or choice of a perfectly perspicuous or hopelessly obscure Bible. One promising effort to rejuvenate the affinity between hermeneutical and Scriptural authority, specifically as they converge in the confession of Scripture's perspicuity, is found in various narrative theologians who propose to retool the

confession of Scripture's perspicuity to express, in an evocative manner, Scripture's coherent message, or in its narrative of a followable world.[101] They recommend that a return to the plain sense of Scripture is a return to a genuinely Protestant tradition in hermeneutics.[102] Also, they argue that in the history of notions such as the literal sense and Scripture's corresponding clarity there has occurred an unfortunate conflation of literal with original meaning that has distorted the former and that the corrective is found in a (re)turn to a canonical and narrative understanding of the hermeneutical task.[103] The most intriguing suggestion is the notion that the plain sense functions as a median component in the sociolinguistic structure of religious communities and thus addresses the way a text functions rather than ascribing to it any ontological property of luminous clarity.[104] As such, the confession of Scripture's clarity is an affirmation of hermeneutical conventionality. Within the scope of Scripture's authority one reads the text as perspicuous from within this tradition.[105] The confession of perspicuity identifies the Protestant hermeneutical context, and clarity describes how the text functions within the Protestant community.

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VIII. Conclusion

Perspicuity is hermeneutically ambiguous: It embodies a larger struggle over authority, epistemology and language, and historical issues such as modernity. But it is confessionally unambiguous: It invites the reader to approach the text with the confidence that Scripture is meant to be understood. The affirmation that Scripture is clear is itself different than the question of how that is the case. The Protestant confession that the subject matter of Scripture is clear is a testimony to how Scripture functions within Protestant hermeneutics (Scripture's teleology).

It is itself informative to ponder how the various presentations of Scripture's perspicuity mirror the multiform affirmations of Scripture's authority within Protestant hermeneutics. When Luther's and later Protestants' authority to interpret Scripture with certainty was challenged, they responded with the hermeneutical affirmation that Scripture's authority implies, even necessitates, affirming its clarity. New challenges brought new visions of the potential of Scripture's clarity, all somehow implied or suggested by an idea of clarity that exceeded its own historical significance.

The notion that Scripture is perspicuous should remain antecedent to affirmations of Scripture's authority. Perspicuity should exist in relative anonymity. It is lamentable to note that Scripture's defenders too eagerly restated perspicuity as a means to defend the Bible against new critical challenges and made it bear the entire burden of an epistemological principle. It may be that perspicuity should be seen as anecdotal of Scripture's authority within Protestant hermeneutics. The confession of perspicuity in Protestant hermeneutics is a denial of being language-bound. It is a

confession of hermeneutical conventionality, and it is an invitation to overcome the constraints of spiritual blindness and alienation.

References

[1] Some of these historical matters are taken up in G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 278; H. A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989) 220-221; W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 1.26-48.

[2] Cf. B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (3d rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 98.

[3] See F. Beisser, *Claritas scripturae bei Martin Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966); R. Herrmann, *Von der Klarheit der Heiligen Schrift: Untersuchungen und Erörterungen über Luthers Lehre von der Schrift in De servo arbitrio* (Berlin: Evangelische, 1958).

[4] Luther wrote: "Let miserable men, therefore, stop imputing with blasphemous perversity the darkness and obscurity of their own hearts to the wholly clear Scriptures of God" (M. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, cited in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* [ed. G. Rupp and P. Watson; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969] 111).

[5] Cf. ibid. 112.

[6] Protestant history of the debate has tended to vilify Erasmus, overlooking his many contributions to Biblical studies, his desire that the Scriptures be disseminated and read by Christians, and his own problems with the authority of Rome. For correctives see E. H. Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 69-102; S. Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University, 1980) 290-320; J. H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1983).

[7] Luther, *Bondage* 158-159. He continued: "Nothing more pernicious could be said than this, for it has led ungodly men to set themselves above the Scriptures and to fabricate whatever they pleased, until the Scriptures have been completely trampled down and we have been believing and teaching nothing but the dreams of madmen."

[8] Ibid. 168.

[9] Ibid. 163; cf. also pp. 111, 167.

[10] Ibid. 110, 112.

[11] Ibid. 112. Luther added: "In divine things the wonder is rather if there are one or two who are not blind, but it is no wonder if all without exception are blind" (p. 166).

[12] See the discussion of this distinction in W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 1.60-66.

[13] Luther, *Bondage* 159.

[14] Ibid. 162.

[15] *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (fourth session; April 8, 1546). The larger section reads: In order to restrain petulant spirits, [the Council] decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall, - in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, - wrestle the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, - whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures, - hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers; even though such interpretations were never [intended] to be at any time published (cited in P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes* [Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1983] 2.83).

[16] So argued U. Zwingli, *The Clarity and Certainty or Power of the Word of God* (cited in J. Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma [1300-1700]*, vol. 4, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984] 207).

[17] A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 180-184; Beisser, *Claritas scripturae*27-31. Luther recognized that the nature of his debate with Erasmus involved the toil of interpretative problems. He added, however, that it was not Scripture that was at issue but its interpretation (Luther, *Bondage* 158).

[18] For example, F. Turretin insisted that Scripture not only made things clear (understood) but that "it is clear in itself" (*The Doctrine of Scripture* [ed. J. W. Beardslee III; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981] 188-189). One telling example of a transformation regarding the role of perspicuity in Protestant hermeneutics is the manner in which the claim *claritas Scripturae* was demonstrated. As a confession of a belief contiguous with the authority of Scripture, both Reformed and Lutheran theologians argued in a circular fashion that since Scripture validates its own character (is its own interpreter), it alone can adequately demonstrate its clarity. For example, Turretin argued: "It is as if I should say that Scripture does not enlighten unless it enlightens, for it enlightens by the very thing by which it is understood" (ibid. 189). The exegetical warrant for clarity was also the theological warrant that was also the confessional warrant. This internal apologetic or circularity was consistent with opponents' arguments as well and represents a common theological method

found in Reformed and post-Tridentine theology. Removing this circularity seems to be a necessary burden during the reappraisal of Scripture's authority and clarity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but this segregates the exegetical exercise from its theological rationale. The result is an affirmation of Scripture's clarity that has little to do with a confession of this matter (R. A. Muller, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, vol. 2, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993] 340-341, 347).

[19] Muller, *Holy Scripture* 313-318, 340-357; O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 1.281284. These themes were variously justified by exegetical appeals that further demonstrated the circularity of Protestantisms defense of perspicuity.

[20] H. W. Frei suggested that when the Reformers articulated a defense of Scripture's clarity we are witnessing merely the codification of a consensual reading of the Bible that is realistic and perspicuous as to its message. The Protestant appeal to an orthodox and traditional understanding of the Christian gospel was merely an articulation of the obvious: that the Bible means what it says and does not mean something else ("The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?," *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* [ed. F. McConnell; Oxford: Oxford University, 1986] 36- 41).

[21] The same can be said with regard to Lutheran theologians' reference to perspicuity in the years immediately following Luther. See Beisser, *Claritas scripturae*; Herrmann, *Klarheit*; Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1.188-189.

[22] Turretin suggested that Scripture's "cause" is "God the 'Father of lights,' who cannot be said either to be ignorant or not wish to speak clearly, unless his supreme goodness and wisdom are called into question" (*Doctrine* 189).

[23] This led Thiselton to suggest that at times Protestants used perspicuity as a Christological, ecclesiological and critical principle (*New Horizons* 180).

[24] Muller, *Holy Scripture* 347.

[25] Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1.188.

[26] See Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* 268-270.

[27] Turretin commented: "The divine message must be clear, yet many passages seem ambiguous" (*Doctrine of Scripture*37). J. Calvin reminded his readers that "there is sometimes obscurity, which the unlearned take as an occasion to wander off to their own destruction" (*The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*[Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963] 367).

[28] Quoted in F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961) 329. Luther said, "An elephant drowns in this sea [of Scripture]; a lamb that is looking for Christ and perseveres, stands on firm ground and reaches the other side" (cited in Oberman, *Luther* 309). The Reformers were also fond of a common patristic theme: "We feed upon the plain parts, we are exercised by the obscure" (Augustine, "Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament," *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* [ed. P. Schaff; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986] 6.321).

[29] P. J. Spener, "The Spiritual Priesthood, Briefly described according to the word of God in seventy questions and answers" [1677]; "The Necessary and Useful Reading of the Holy Scriptures" [1694], *Pietists: Selected Writings* (ed. P. C. Erb; New York: Paulist, 1983) 55, 71.

[30] Note how easily Spener blends the spiritual and practical matters of reading Scripture: "Indeed the Scripture is a light for our enlightenment but it is a word of the Spirit and if we could separate the Holy Spirit from the Word (which we cannot do), the Scripture would no longer work" (Necessary 72).

[31] Spener, "Spiritual" 55. Like Luther, Spener viewed Scripture's simplicity as synonymous with its clarity. On the widespread appeal to the "pious reader," the "contemplating subject" and the limits on perspicuity in relationship to piety see Weber, *Foundations* 1.282-284.

[32] Spener, "Spiritual" 55.

[33] J. A. Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament* [1742], cited in *Pietists* (ed. Erb) 255. Bengel also argued that annotations were not necessary when Scripture was first delivered, and should only serve to "preserve, restore, or defend the purity of the text." Spener and Francke similarly advocated the priority of exegesis in response to those who find in Scripture only what justifies the confession of faith or when criticizing annotated Bibles (see D. W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978] 67-69).

[34] It is an overstatement to argue, as many have against the Pietist tradition, that it used the Bible as a devotional tool rather than a source of doctrine. For example, A. H. Francke reasoned that since the affections of the inspired writers contributed to Scripture it was "a cogent argument in favour of the study of the [author's] Affections; for when we have acquired ability to develop them, the Scriptures will, of course, cease to be ambiguous" (cited in Brown, *Understanding Pietism* 80-81).

[35] A development of this pastoral intention occasionally turns up an isolation of the objective or outer clarity of Scripture: "By the 'perspicuity of the Scriptures' we affirm that they were written with sufficient clarity that readers or hearers are accountable for their response to the content conveyed." Perspicuity implies culpability: "All who can read or hear the Bible are responsible to read it, assent to its teaching and live

by it" (G. R. Lewis and B. A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987] 1.161).

[36] Brown, *Understanding Pietism* 71-80; cf. F. E. Stoeer, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

[37] One could argue that Pietism's teleological emphasis regarding perspicuity is closer to various patristic comments on the subject than the emphasis on perspicuity as a property found in Protestant scholastics. Comments from Christianity's first centuries tend to confirm that the greatest obstacle to understanding what is clear (as opposed to demonstrating that it is clear, certainly a distinct subject) rests with the pastoral needs of the reader. For example, one could summarize Chrysostom's comments on clarity as follows: Scripture is clear, but we are lazy. His concern rests with the effort exercised by his flock to understand the essential matters of Scripture, which are altogether clear.

[38] Chrysostom "Homilies on Thessalonians" (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 13.388).

[39] Farrar argued that Chrysostom overstated his first point - "It is belied by the whole history of exegesis, which in different ages has come to opposite conclusions about matters of much importance" - but was worthy of praise for asserting his second point: "This rule is our chief source of consolation amid the endless perplexities of divergent interpretation. If a truth be essential to salvation, it must appeal clearly on the pages which contain a Divine Revelation: otherwise the Revelation would not be a Revelation" (*History* 473). Oberman commented that application of Luther's principle of *sola Scriptura* did not bring about "the certainty [Luther] anticipated. It has in fact been responsible for a multiplicity of explanations and interpretations that seem to render absurd any dependence on the clarity of the Scriptures" (*Luther* 220). Instead, Oberman argued that one should read Luthers appeal to perspicuity in evangelical terms: "The clarity of the Scriptures leads to the recognition of man and his indestructible dependence either on God the Redeemer or Satan the corrupter" (ibid. 225).

[40] Farrar, *History* 329.

[41] The *Irish Articles* read: "Although there be some hard things in the Scriptures (especially such as have proper relation to the times in which they were first uttered, and prophecies of things which were afterwards to be fulfilled), yet all things necessary to be known unto everlasting salvation are clearly delivered therein; and nothing of that kind is spoken under dark mysteries in one place which is not in other places spoken more familiarly and plainly, to the capacity both of learned and unlearned" (cited in Schaff, *Creeds* 3.527). Note that the reference to "dark mysteries" still concerns matters necessary for salvation, and historical proximity accounts for some "hard things" (as does the nature of prophecy itself).

[42] The *Westminster Confession* reads: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them" (ibid. 3.604). See J. G. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond: John Knox, 1973).

[43] *A Body of Divinity* (attributed to J. Ussher; cited in J. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967] 370).

[44] The same theme was defended by Turretin when he argued that "a believer who has enlightened eyes of the mind can comprehend [the] mysteries sufficiently for salvation if he reads carefully" (*Doctrine* 186-187).

[45] See the arguments offered by J. Barton, *People of the Book: The Authority of the Bible in Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1988) 84-86; Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1.190-191; Farrar, *History* 328; Beisser, *Claritasscripturae* 79-87; Herrmann, *Klarheit* 19-23.

[46] Turretin argued: "The question therefore comes to this: is Scripture so understandable in matters necessary for salvation, not with regard to what is taught but with regard to the manner of teaching, not with regard to the subject [persons], but to the object [Scripture itself], that it can be read and understood for salvation by believers without the help of external traditions? The Roman Catholics deny this; we affirm it" (*Doctrine* 188).

[47] Weber, reflecting upon the larger Protestant tradition, noted that perspicuity was not viewed "as something absolute but rather conditional. It did not apply to the geographical, historical, and other scientific statements of Scripture, for which scientific insights were necessary, and it did apply to Scripture only to the degree that someone could translate it from the original languages or was able to read such a translation. There are thus presuppositions of a purely factual nature which have to be fulfilled" (*Foundations* 1.282). Cf. also C. M. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 116-117.

[48] Cited in Schaff, *Creeds* 3.604.

[49] "The clarity of Scripture evidently does not in any way have the character of simplicity" (Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* 270). For example, R. H. Gundry cautioned against pressing harmonizations between the gospels because that damages "the clarity of Scripture" (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 626).

[50] Calvin's notion that it is the reader who needs illumination, rather than the Scriptures, is consistent with Luther's argument that Scripture is light, even if the reader is unable to perceive this light. For Calvin, perspicuity appears to be, in a rhetorical manner, the function of Scripture itself in dispelling the obscurity of the message: "Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God" (J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [ed. J. T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960] 69-72). For Calvin's use of the terms *claritas* and *perspicuitas* see F. L. Battles and R. Wevers, *A Concordance to Calvin's Institutio 1559* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

[51] On the relationship between the subject-object distinction in the Protestant development of perspicuity see Weber, *Foundations* 1.283-284.

[52] F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979) 145.

[53] The language of Scripture is not a ghetto language, immune from a general appraisal of language. But this type of accessibility does not imply a religious confession about that language. Yet Scripture's language and the clarity of its message are inseparable. See G. Ebeling, *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

[54] Farrar, *History* 329. Of related concern are the roles of perspicuity and the literal sense in the Protestant eucharistic debates. On this issue see P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 72-85, 375403; Pelikan, *Reformation* 203-217. On the subject of *sensus* see D. J. Moo, "The Problem of Sensus Plenior," *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 183; Ozment, *Age* 63-72; B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1978) xvi-xvii. Luther's appeal to various levels of meaning was especially apparent in his exposition of the Psalms (Oberman, *Luther* 250-254).

[55] A. S. Wood, *Captive to the Word: Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 175. Wood added: "For a thousand years the Church had buttressed its theological edifice by means of an authoritative exegesis which depended on allegory as its chief medium of interpretation. Luther struck a mortal blow at this vulnerable spot" (p. 164). What the practical effects of this "mortal blow" were, and how Luthers reduction of a fourfold to a twofold sense revolutionized hermeneutics, is debatable. But crucial to understanding the role of perspicuity in this revolution is the significant role it played in confessing the accessibility of the true subject matter of Scripture (see J. S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* [Cambridge: Harvard University, 1969] 222-227).

[56] Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1.190.

[57] On Luther's rejection of the pneumatic claims of Karlstadt and the Zwickau prophets see M. Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets," *Luther's Works* (ed. C. Bergendoff; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958) 40.73223 (esp. 189-191). For a discussion of H. Rahtmann's confrontation with Lutheran orthodoxy over the subject of Scriptures clarity see Weber, *Foundations* 1.284-285.

[58] See Herrmann, *Klarheit* 44-78; Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1.187-191.

[59] "The grammatical and theological issues stand together in the context of the Protestant movement away from allegorical exegesis toward a literal-grammatical reading of the text" (Muller, *Holy Scripture* 340-341).

[60] So say J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper, 1979) 182-183; Thiselton, *New Horizons* 185; Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* 274-276.

[61] The opposite error is to maintain that somehow the message of Scripture is available without a realistic maintenance of the literal sense of Scripture's form or words (*verba*). I believe that the distortion of Scriptures clarity in Protestant hermeneutics comes later, as Protestants encountered the Enlightenment's charge that the Bible must be interpreted as any other book would be interpreted. This was tantamount to concentrating on an objectivity or, following Luther, the outer clarity of Scripture at the expense of the confession of Scripture's inner clarity or the subjectivity of Protestant hermeneutics' appeal to a fuller sense within a theological hermeneutic. This subject will be taken up below. On the history of the larger hermeneutical issues Muller offers a genuine starting point when he reminds us that the background of Luther's idea that words (*verba*) point to things (*res*), the precise question of relationship addressed in the debate, is founded in the Augustinian tradition of interpretation (*signa* and *res significata*), a tradition that continued to influence Reformed theology into the eighteenth century (*Holy Scripture* 344).

[62] Berkouwer argued that "the Reformation was not dealing with the words by themselves, but with the message in Scripture of which the words spoke. This clarity of the message *presupposes* the accessibility of the words, but that accessibility was not the subject of the real purpose of the confession" (*Holy Scripture* 275).

[63] In particular, notice the application of Wittgenstein's proposition that a necessary condition for meaningful discourse is based in a concept of clarity to the subject of Scripture's clarity (against the likes of Dilthey, Heidegger, Bultmann and Gadamer) in R. T. Sandin, "The Clarity of Scripture," *The Living and Active Word of God: Studies in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz* (ed. M. Inch and R. Youngblood; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 237-253. Sandin also argued that "Biblical hermeneutics is an application of general hermeneutical principles," that "if we begin by assuming that every meaningful utterance is clear in itself, we must then understand the task of interpretation as limited to that of removing hindrances that prevent the verbal statement from functioning effectively as a vehicle of communication," and that "a similar view of the task of interpretation emerges from the Reformer's view of the

Bible [as] clear in itself and interpret[ing] itself. Wittgenstein's view of the clarity of meaningful utterance therefore has its counterpart in the Reformers doctrine of the clarity of Scripture" (ibid. 241-242).

[64] N. M. de S. Cameron has convincingly shown these links as the proper background for the rise of critical studies in nineteenth-century Britain (*Biblical Higher Criticism and the Defense of Infallibilism in 19th Century Britain* [Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1987] 7-114, 263-289). Cameron cited Spinoza's significant role in the debate over Scripture's authority and interpretation that would blossom in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain: "I determined to examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines, which I do not find clearly set down therein" (ibid. 16).

[65] T. Arnold, *Essay on the Right Interpretation and Understanding of the Scriptures*, cited in Cameron, *Criticism* 34.

[66] The characteristics included under the theme of critical study and the Bible's perspicuity were clarity's implicit role in an empirical method, an openness to examine Scripture in itself rather than from tradition or ecclesiastical authorities, and a sense of realism allied with a form of biblicism that would remain a strong tendency into the twentieth century among Protestants. See *Critics of the Bible 1724-1873* (ed. J. Drury; New York: Cambridge, 1989); H. G. Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 289- 410; Cameron, *Criticism* 18-28; N. O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989) 179-189.

[67] Cf. Cameron, *Criticism* 75-114; H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974) 17-65.

[68] See the development of the theme "Scripture in tradition" in D. Tracy, "On Reading Scripture Theologically," *Theology and Dialogue* (ed. B. Marshall; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990) 35-69.

[69] Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative" 37. One could argue that the eclipse of the literal reading of Biblical narrative was also the eclipse of perspicuity as a confessional principle within Protestant hermeneutics. G. L. Comstock believed Frei's work to be a call to "return to an older hermeneutic method" that linked the *sensus literalis* and the Bibles clarity: "Jesus was born to Mary, a virgin; he healed the sick and raised the dead in his earthly ministry; he died on a cross and was resurrected from the grave on the third day. One does not need a sophisticated theory of religious experience in order to understand the meaning of this tale. Nor is the conceptual apparatus of any philosophical system necessary in order to provide justification for it; it stands on its own feet" ('"Everything Depends on the *Type* of the Concepts that the Interpretation is made to Convey': Max Kadushin Among the Narrative Theologians," *Modern Theology* 5/3 [April 1989] 222).

[70] On the argument that perspicuity was (and should be) linked with the need for faith in the clarity of Scripture's principal content and its ability to depict with ostensive clarity its subject matter see Pannenberg, *Basic Questions* 1.60-66, 188-191.

[71] Muller argued: "Perspicuity is a doctrinal assumption, resting on the declaration of the inspiration, authority, and soteriological sufficiency of the biblical revelation" (Muller, *Holy Scripture* 341).

[72] G. C. Berkouwer suggested that Scripture's clarity is not confined to the polemical context of the Luther and Erasmus debate but is part of "an urgent warning far beyond the controversies of the sixteenth century." He viewed it as a positive, challenging confession that precluded a premature cessation of exegetical inquiry on the one hand and yet maintained the confession of Scripture's accessibility and certainty on the other. If God still has more light to break forth from his Word then, according to Berkouwer, "no confession concerning Scripture is more disturbing to the church than the confession of its perspicuity." Rather than admitting historical finitude as the boundary of religious certainty, Protestants have the confession of perspicuity that "could keep the church from perishing in the historicity of a limited horizon." Berkouwer's argument is that the confession of perspicuity can be viewed as confrontational, preservative and extensible (*Holy Scripture* 267, 288, 296).

[73] We can only note the significance of this line of study within Protestant history; see F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English* (3d ed.; New York: Oxford University, 1978); A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken, 1964); *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 3, *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (ed. S. L. Greenslade; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1963); *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (ed. N. O. Hatch and M. A. Noll; New York: Oxford University, 1982).

[74] J. H. Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (Glasgow: Collins, reprint 1977) 96. On the subject of the role of the Bible in early nineteenth-century Protestantism in Britain see J. Callahan, "Primitivist Piety: The Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren," *Studies in Evangelicalism* (ed. D. W. Dayton and K. E. Rowe; Metuchen: Scarecrow, forthcoming).

[75] On this subject see D. Bowen, *The Idea of the Victorian Church: A Study of the Church of England, 1833-1889* (Montreal: McGill University, 1968); *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles Since 1700* (ed. R. Currie, A. D. Gilbert and L. Horsley; Oxford: Clarendon, 1977); G. I. T. Machin, *The Catholic Question in English Politics, 1820 to 1830* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964); *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain 18321868* (New York: Clarendon, 1977).

[76] See D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 12-14, 75-77.

[77] On this theme see W. Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation: Some Reformation Controversies and Their Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1955); Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* 213-239; Oberman, *Luther* 209-225.

[78] A related theme is found in the Reformed tradition's distinction between God's revelation in nature (which makes humans culpable) and God's revelation in Scripture (which is more clear and more pointed to reveal God's salvation, makes the gospel available, and is otherwise unavailable in nature). There is a clearer and a more obscure means of Gods revelation. There are two books that reveal God: (1) creation/nature and universal providence, which is sufficient to make humans accountable before God; (2) Scripture, in which, as the *Belgic Confession* (1561) reads, "he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word; that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation" (Schaff, *Creeds* 3.384). This argument is also found in the *Confessio Fidei Gallicana* (1559) 3.360: "God reveals himself to men; firstly, in his works, in their creation, as well as in their preservation and control. Secondly, and more clearly, in his Word [the] Holy Scriptures."

[79] G. M. Marsden, "Everyone Ones Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," *Bible in America* 80. Also see H. Hovenkamp, *Science and Religion in America 1800-1860* (Philadelphia, 1978); T. D. Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1977).

[80] See S. E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper, 1963) 1-15, 103133; N. O. Hatch, "*Sola Scriptura* and *Novus Ordo Seclorum*", *Bible in America* 59-78.

[81] C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 1.183-184.

[82] Ibid. 1.186-187. Hodge offered this opinion against the nagging threat of the totalitarianism of the Church of Rome. More recently Weber argued that the first implication of Scripture's perspicuity was "the openness of Scripture for everyone." Accessibility to Scripture is not dependent upon the "obligatory interpretation provided by the Church." It is not "a secret book which can only be decoded by [the] initiated," but perspicuity "makes it possible for 'every Christian to deal with Scripture without tutelage' " (*Foundations* 1.281).

[83] J. W. Nevin, "The Sect System," *Mercersburg Review* 1 (September 1849) 491-493.

[84] Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1.184.

[85] Of course the desire to restrain the application of perspicuity received a different reading from dissenting and primitivist Protestantism, as it did from latitudinarians generally. For example, Farrar complained that although the Reformation was an immense step forward in interpretation, it did not escape the error of dogmatism:

"The whole Bible from Genesis downwards was forced to speak the language of the accepted formulae, and the 'perspicuity of Scripture' was identified with the facility with which it could be forced into semblable accordance with dogmatic systems." He complained that seventeenth-century divines (namely, Hollaz and Quenstedt) spout their assertions of Scripture's perspicuity, but such assertions "furnish no assistance and solve no difficulty, and [they] can only be maintained in detail by an accumulation of special pleas" (*History* 26-27).

[86] "From light to dark should be the movement" (H. D. McDonald, *What the Bible Teaches About the Bible* [Wheaton: Tyndale, 1979] 141). This concern of course is as old as Christian interpretation of Scripture itself. But the relationship between a distinctly Protestant tradition as opposed to another tradition raises the question of the tension between clarity and obscurity to another level. On the admission of problems associated with the clear and unclear see Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* 105-138.

[87] Or so it is argued by Dilthey and observed by H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2d rev. ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1989) 174-184.

[88] J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970) 103-108.

[89] Few familiar with reader-oriented criticism would argue against this notion. Of particular interest would be the sense of suspicion regarding the interpreter's involvement in determining what is clear and what is obscure; see Thiselton's treatment of reader-response theories and the hermeneutics of reading in *New Horizons.* Also see R. E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1969).

[90] I also offer the suggestion that Gadamer's notion of a hermeneutics of tradition bears indirectly upon the discussion of clarity and obscurity in Protestant hermeneutics. See A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); G. R. Osborne, "Genre Criticism - *Sensus Literalis*," *Trinity Journal* 4/2 (Autumn 1983) 1-27.

[91] R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1960).

[92] R. F. Thiemann, "Radiance and Obscurity in Biblical Narrative," *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (ed. G. Green; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 25.

[93] Rarely, if at all, did perspicuity enjoy the peaceful contemplation that would render a more abstract or quixotic depiction possible. As Luther chided Erasmus, so many "have found the Scriptures crystal clear and have confirmed this both by their writing and their blood," but those who castigate the Scriptures as obscure "made

this assertion neither by their life nor their death, but only with their pen" (*Bondage* 168-169).

[94] This is true of the influence of Nietzsche and Dilthey; see Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 218-264.

[95] H. E. Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1926) 33.

[96] On the rescue of the Bible see M. Marty, *Modern American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986) 1.232-236.

[97] Fosdick, *Modern Use* 33-64. Fosdick rejected the "ancient solution" to the problem of the "old book in a new world" - namely, the use of allegory: "For the necessity of accommodating venerable scriptures to new conditions has been faced again and again by every religion that has had sacred scriptures at all. Ours is not the first modern age." Fosdick's solution was to retain the literal meaning of the text and then seek from it "abiding experiences" even though we must admit "changing categories" of progress in history (ibid. 65-67, 97).

[98]. H. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984) 168-169.

[99] A. T. Pierson, "Antagonism to the Bible," *Our Hope* 15 (January 1909) 475.

[100] T. P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 36. "Higher criticism also took away the individual believers ability to interpret the Bible for himself. The perspicuity of the Bible was one of evangelicalism's most cherished ideas. Most American Protestants believed that the layman could understand the Bible completely on his own. But the findings of higher criticism forced many lay people to doubt their ability to understand anything."

[101] Thiemann, "Radiance" 28-39.

[102] This also includes an approach to the text that resembles that of a social scientist rather than a literary or philosophical approach to general hermeneutical theory. It is primarily represented by Frei, " 'Literal Sense' " ; *Types of Christian Theology*(ed. G. Hunsinger and W. C. Placher; New Haven: Yale University, 1992).

[103] B. S. Childs, "The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. H. Donner, R. Hanhart and R. Smend; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977) 80-93. We may add that the revived interest in the *sensus literalis* does not necessitate, and may even exclude, the literalistic reading of Scripture. Instead the *sensus literalis* is the gateway to a postcritical hermeneutic.

[104] K. E. Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," *Scriptural Authority* 59-63. Also consult R. Loewe, "The 'Plain Meaning' of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis," *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies, London* (ed. J. G. Weiss; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964) 1.181.

[105] Scripture is its own best interpreter within Protestant hermeneutics because any Protestant reading of Scripture is already its interpretation (Wood, *Christian Understanding* 30- 49). Also see J. P. Callahan, "The Convergence of Narrative and Christology: Hans W. Frei on the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," *JETS* 38/4 (December 1995) 531-547.